

5-1-2002

Doing justice: congregations and community organizing

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Recommended Citation

Cole-Arnal, Oscar (2002) "Doing justice: congregations and community organizing," *Consensus*: Vol. 28 : Iss. 1 , Article 18.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol28/iss1/18>

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"failings" in the journals he knew would be published, Cunningham reveals parts of Merton's personality that were less than glamorous or saintly.

However, the great strength of this book is how the author brings together the various and complex pieces that make up the life and work of Thomas Merton and creates not a "plaster statue" of Merton the saint (although there is a movement of admirers who are advocating his canonization, Merton would be aghast at the thought!) but an engaging portrayal of person of profound faith struggling to understand the significance of his life in the midst of an unbelieving world and a church deeply invested in American culture.

Contemplation, for Merton, was not to be confused with "recharging your spiritual batteries" but was a way of life that undergirded action. Merton's relevance to the modern reader was his constant struggle to understand the role of the contemplative (or the Christian) in post-Christian society, his search for an authentic expression of faith, and his prophetic condemnations of unchecked capitalism and the culture of violence it creates. His words in the 1960's can be read with the same relevance as when they were written. Cunningham offers a tremendously readable account of Merton's life and work that provides a clean segue into the writings of Merton himself. In fact the final chapter is a bibliographic essay that will help the reader discern with which "Merton" (i.e., Merton the social critic, the poet, the theologian, the teacher, etc.) one might like to begin. But whichever "Merton" one reads, one will always be reading "Merton the monk."

Kevin Powell

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Doing Justice: Congregations and Community Organizing

Dennis A. Jacobsen

Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2001

140 pages, \$21.00 Softcover

So many of our theological works remain immersed in the abstract world of ideas. No such accusation dare be levelled against Dennis A. Jacobsen's *Doing Justice*. Its subtitle *Congregations and Community Organizing* describes aptly the purpose and content of this book. What I appreciate most about this work can be found in its resolute integration

Published by Scholars Commons @ Laurier, 2002

of biblical values and practice. Nowhere does the book fall into that non-incarnational dualism so rampant in Lutheran and Christian theology.

I applaud Jacobsen's refusal to abandon his faith in the turbulent life of justice making. He casts open and clear eyes on the broken character of our globe and neighbourhoods. He speaks of American blindness to sin and evil within social, economic, and political structures. Faithful to biblical radicalism he reminds us that "the world as it is operates out of domineering power, crass self-interest and quid pro quo"(5). At the same time Pastor Jacobsen, knowing that he addresses his book to the middle class faithful, underscores our biblical mandate as the people of God: "For Christians who do not live in poverty, the challenge is to view the world as it is from the underside, from the bottom, from the vantage point of the poor"(5). At the same time the author reminds us that this broken world remains God's world awaiting the faithful witness of justice from those believing that moral heroism takes precedence over *realpolitik*. Such commitment takes upon itself the mantle of engaging "the rough and tumble public arena"(12).

Having laid the basis for leaving the comfortable pew, Jacobsen leads us into the very specific world of community organizing out of the congregation's very life. Not only does he provide some structural advice for such work but also he draws from the riches of his personal experience. The book abounds with stories of individual lives imprisoned by poverty and hopelessness who find in the Gospel the power to rise above their chains to take on the giant gods of success and consumerism. While accepting the community organizing goals of self-interest he injects the biblical reality of the marginalised claiming their own power and authority in collective manifestations of justice. Jacobsen affirms the need for biblically-based community power over against the idolatry of "rugged individualism" while, at the same time, he insists that such organizing demands much attention to the individual needs of those involved in community change. In this way, agenda does not turn people into things. He gives a significant amount of attention to two areas of difficulty for middle-class believers, namely, the need to organize within the larger municipal structures and the necessity of confrontation and agitation.

His last chapter "A Spirituality for the Long Haul" came to me as a special gift. It is for all of us, weary of struggle, who want more victories and grow tired of the costs. Pastor Jacobsen returns us to the roots of our faith by providing strength for the on-going walk. Jacobsen

reminds us that we are pilgrims on a journey, ever restless, ever scarred, ever seeking justice, ever holding hands with each other. The very last section of the book provides an extensive study guide for congregationally based action and reflection, a resource I recommend for all devoted to a gospel with feet in the public arena.

Doing Justice receives my highest commendation, and as tribute to that assessment I plan to use it as a study resource as our own congregation begins its plunge into community activism.

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The Word on the Street: Performing the Scriptures in the Urban Context

Stanley P. Saunders and Charles L. Campbell

Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000.

192 pages, \$24.95 Softcover

Performing the Word on the street in an urban context? That doesn't sound like anything I would ever do or even consider doing. Yet this book about preaching and biblical interpretation is a book I read over and over again. If your ministry leads you to come in regular contact with urban poverty and/or feel tempted to give up on energetic, prophetic preaching that relates to social and economic reality, this book is filled with encouragement for you.

The Word on the Street has its roots in the Open Door Community in Atlanta, Georgia, where Saunders and Campbell and their students at Columbia Theological Seminary leave the classroom and are transformed by the experience of reading Scripture in the midst of urban poverty. They assert that the place where the Bible is read changes the meaning we draw from its message. Thus their thesis: "We must learn to read the Bible in new places!" Going deeper, they say:

Reading the Scriptures on the streets has convinced us that the Bible can be powerfully and faithfully read and proclaimed in the places where our sight is filled with the distorting, idolatrous, corrosive images of